

***Retail markets in northern and midland England 1870 – 1914: civic icon, municipal white elephant or consumer paradise?*¹**

The English midlands town of Derby celebrated the opening of a new market hall in 1866. The local newspaper was ecstatic, describing it as, ‘The greatest public work ever accomplished in Derby’ and claiming that it was, ‘unquestionably the finest Market Hall in Britain’.² This enthusiasm did not last: there were soon complaints of poor management, filthy conditions in the market, that it was in the wrong place and that traders who occupied stalls there were undercut by those trading from a nearby street.³ Although retail markets were ubiquitous in Victorian England, there was no consensus about their usefulness. For example, the Mayor of Middlesbrough told the Royal Commission on Market Rights and Tolls in 1888 that, ‘the facilities now offered to people through the medium of shops, do away with the necessity of their going to market’.⁴ Some historians, such as Jefferys and Mui and Mui have similarly traced a long-term decline in the importance of markets.⁵ Others, however, have regarded urban retail markets as having an important and continuing part to play in retail provision in the nineteenth century, particularly for the working classes. Alexander claimed that in the middle of the century retail markets could satisfy most of the normal needs of households,

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² *Derby Mercury*, 30 May 1866, p. 5, col. 1.

³ *Ibid.*, 14 June 1871, p. 5, col. 3; 21 Jan. 1880, p. 2, col. 2.

⁴ *Royal Commission on Market Rights and Tolls* (hereafter RCMRT), vol. IV (P.P. 1888, LV), Q. 7024.

⁵ Jefferys, *Retail trading in Britain*, p.39; Mui and Mui, *Shops and shopkeeping*, p.150.

while both he and Winstanley noted the adaptability of markets and suggested that their familiarity made them more easily accepted than shops by migrant populations.⁶

There has been more agreement about the importance of nineteenth century market halls, with Stobart regarding them as an established part of the retail scene. The 1870s was the peak decade for market construction with the 1880s being the highpoint of the market hall.⁷ Hodson has argued their importance for working-class shopping in Lancashire while Schmiechen and Carls have made bold claims for them, writing of, ‘an urban revolution in which the buying and selling of comestibles and other commodities was transformed from dirty and windswept streets and “marketplaces” into an enclosed and “modern” building that boasted a number of amenities and, in many instances, considerable architectural panache’.⁸ The architectural impact of many Victorian market halls is undeniable; claims that they transformed working-class food supply, improved morality and conduct, and made a significant contribution to public health are more contentious.

Architecturally impressive market halls were a feature of many European cities and Stobart and van Damme have recently highlighted the importance of comparative analysis of markets and market halls, drawing on case studies not just from Europe but also from America

⁶ Alexander, *Retailing in England* p.42; Winstanley, *The shopkeeper's world*, p.5. Scola, ‘Retailing in the nineteenth-century town’ pp. 156-7 warned that the function of the market was more complex, with some markets failing to prosper and many migrants being familiar with widespread village shops.

⁷ Stobart, *Spend, spend, spend!*, pp. 130-33.

⁸ Hodson, ‘“The municipal store” and ‘Civic identity, custom and commerce’; Schmiechen and Carls, *The British market hall*, p. x. Schmiechen and Carls is an indispensable guide to the subject, with an invaluable, but not always wholly accurate, gazetteer of market buildings.

and Asia.⁹ As well as revealing similarities and differences across national boundaries, such an approach can help with identifying some of the broader issues which can be illuminated through specific examples. For example, two distinct models can be identified: the English pattern of single-market cites and the Parisian polycentric model of evenly distributed neighbourhood markets. The latter model prevailed in Spain where markets remained central to the supply of meat, fish and greengrocery well into the twentieth century, with Barcelona providing a particularly good example of this.¹⁰ Centrally located market halls were more problematic. Concentrating market trading in a centrally located space necessitated long journeys on foot, or the cost of a tram ride, for an increasingly dispersed working-class population. The market halls built in Brussels in the period after 1840 were generally unsuccessful, with half of the *halles centrales* being converted to an ice skating rink and variety theatre in the 1890s. The open-air markets were more resilient. Reasons for the relative failure of the market halls seem to have been competition from shops, including those of butchers, door-to-door peddling and the home delivery of food.¹¹ Berlin invested heavily in the 1880s in a centralised, rail-based market hall network, despite the concerns of some politicians that most needs could be met by fixed shops. It was apparent, however, that city officials had made little effort to assess the real interests of customers and within 30 years the central retail market halls were of growing insignificance for ordinary consumers.¹² The quality of local decision making and market management and the role of markets within the overall retail mix, are important themes. Other issues highlighted by international comparisons include the relative importance of public and private provision; and

⁹ Stobart and van Damme, 'Introduction: markets in modernization'.

¹⁰ Fava et al, 'Barcelona food retailing'. See also Frasquet, Gil and Mollá, 'Spain'.

¹¹ Arnout, 'Something old, something borrowed, something new', pp. 175-77.

¹² Lohmeier, '*Bürgerliche gesellschaft* and consumer interests'; Trentmann, *Empire of Things*, p. 207.

changing attitudes towards the appropriateness of markets being located in or near upmarket shopping streets.¹³

This article focuses on officially provided *retail* markets, particularly market halls. There is not space to consider *wholesale* markets which were increasingly important and lucrative; or unofficial markets for second-hand goods, like the flat iron market in Salford, which often continued to thrive after many general retail markets were in decline.¹⁴ Instead it takes a more critical look at urban retail markets and market halls in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth, drawing evidence from a sample of 16 markets in the midlands and northern England. Almost all of these markets provided a wide range of items, from fresh produce and groceries to clothing and household goods. In some instances there were specific areas, or even separate buildings, devoted to perishable goods like fish. These were not always successful. The period chosen is that in which market halls reached their greatest importance, but also faced growing competition from newer forms of retailing such as multiple shops and co-operative stores.

Section I sets the scene by looking briefly at the ownership and management of markets with a particular focus on the role of local authorities. The following three sections are essentially concerned with the relative success or otherwise of markets and market halls. It is not easy to define success. Markets were not simply business ventures where success could be measured by profitability; there was also an important element of providing a public good, for example around quality control, or even making an ostentatious statement of civic pride. But profit was not irrelevant so section II looks at the financing of market halls, including profitability and return on capital invested, in an attempt to assess whether they could be considered good

¹³ Stobart and van Damme, 'Introduction: markets in modernization'. New York provides an example of a shift from public to private; Denmark of pressure to relocate markets away from shopping streets.

¹⁴ Davies, 'Saturday night markets'. See also Kelly, 'The streets for the people' with regard to the continuing importance of street markets in London.

business ventures. Section III addresses the role of markets in the overall retail mix and considers the extent to which they may have filled a gap in urban retailing or been in competition with and increasingly duplicated other provision. Section IV considers less tangible justifications for public investment in markets and market halls, such as the creation of a controlled environment and their role as civic icons. Section V provides a summary and conclusions.

The main sources used are the minutes of evidence taken by the Royal Commission on Market Rights and Tolls in the late 1880s; records of local authority (or occasionally private company) market committees; newspapers; and trade directories. Although these sources are invaluable in providing vivid descriptions of market activity, they rarely, if ever, provide evidence as to why particular decisions were made by market authorities as opposed to what those decisions were. Nor are they unbiased. Market traders tended to have a vested interest in low rents and minimal interference from the market authorities; shopkeepers might want protection from what they perceived as unfair competition; and local councillors often had one eye on the need for economy in the interests of ratepayers while also wanting to have a better, and perhaps more grandiose, market than that in a neighbouring town. It is, however, possible to draw some broad conclusions from these competing narratives: in particular it appears that whilst retail markets, whether or not located in market halls, were not becoming obsolete by the early twentieth century, lavish expenditure on such halls was hard to justify.

I

Table 1 gives brief details about the markets in the sample. These sixteen places comprise three large cities (Birmingham, Leeds and Sheffield); two towns that appeared from nowhere in the nineteenth century (Birkenhead and Middlesbrough); five northern textile towns (Blackburn, Bolton, Burnley, Halifax and Rochdale); three old county/market towns that had become large industrial urban places (Derby, Leicester and Preston); two small industrial towns (Burton and Cannock); and one fairly traditional market town (Wakefield). The towns are fully representative

of the variety of urban places in northern and midland England in the late nineteenth century, but were also chosen because of the availability of sources relating to their markets. In particular, all except Birkenhead were visited by officials of the Royal Commission.

Table 1 about here

The Commissioners took a particular interest in ownership and management. In 1870 one of these markets was privately owned, three were owned by companies, and the remainder by local authorities; by 1914 all but two were in local authority ownership. Evidence presented to the Royal Commission suggested that 41 per cent of all markets were owned by local authorities, but that this rose to 83 per cent of markets held in boroughs. The three company-owned markets were in the smaller towns; the privately-owned one was Sheffield, the third largest place in the sample. The Commissioners had little doubt that markets should be owned and run by the appropriate local authority and that those run by companies were usually the worst managed.¹⁵ Wakefield market was a prime example of this. Described as the ‘worst market in Yorkshire’ by a representative of the town council that was seeking to acquire the market rights, its owners had long faced criticism for poor facilities and poor cleanliness, even being accused of deliberately mismanaging it to force the local authority to purchase it.¹⁶ On the other hand, Cannock appears to have been well managed and relatively profitable.¹⁷ Rochdale was the largest market in England owned by a company, and there were few complaints about how it was managed. The local authority would have liked to have purchased it but could not agree a price.¹⁸ Sheffield’s markets were owned by the Duke of Norfolk. Again there was general agreement that the

¹⁵ RCMRT, vol. VIII (P.P. 1890-91 XXXVIII), Q. 13,192.

¹⁶ *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*, 15 Mar. 1900, p. 6, col. 7; Schmiechen and Carls, *British market hall*, p. 37.

¹⁷ Staffordshire Archives, Cannock Market Hall Company, Directors’ Minutes, 1868-97, D4880/1.

¹⁸ RCMRT, vol. I (P.P. 1888, LIII), QQ. 4590-4600.

markets were well managed, but that in principle the market authority ought to be the town council.¹⁹ Protracted negotiations about the purchase of the markets took place in the 1870s but the parties were unable to agree a price and the duke remained the owner until 1899.

Local authority ownership and management was the norm in larger towns such as those represented in this sample. Overall management of the markets was invariably in the hands of a markets (or markets and fairs) committee, reporting to the town or city council, and often with sub-committees dealing with particular aspects of market activities such as building work or lettings. Most committees were conscientious, taking a close interest in how the markets were run. For example, at Leicester, where the principal market was held in the open, business included selecting new tenants for stalls, sometimes from around 10 applicants each of whom would offer whatever rent they thought it was worth; agreeing estimates for repairs and maintenance; dealing with misdemeanours by traders such as selling after hours, using bad language or harassing customers; and considering requests for rent reductions.²⁰ Birkenhead's markets committee was better at dealing with day-to-day issues like letting of stalls than with taking major decisions about the future of the markets. A sub-committee charged with recommending the best way of providing a covered wholesale market noted in 1903 that the matter had been under consideration since 1888 and that although various proposals had been made none had found general favour.²¹

Market committees may generally have been conscientious but were not necessarily very expert. In giving evidence to the Royal Commission, Archie Scarr, Mayor of Leeds and one-time market trader, underlined the importance of consulting those who actually worked in the markets

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, QQ. 4902-4904.

²⁰ Leicestershire and Rutland Record Office (hereafter LRO), Leicester Corporation, Markets and Tolls Committee, Minutes 1894-1914, CM 25/1-4.

²¹ Wirral Archives, Birkenhead Corporation, Markets Committee, Minutes 1903-08, B/046/7, pp. 40-44.

as had been done in Leeds, ‘whereas in other Corporations they have gone to the architect and got a nice building sketched on paper ... and then when it has been built it has not been worth anything for practical purposes’.²² Lack of expertise could prove costly. The Preston Markets and Town Hall Committee (and the corporation itself) were severely criticised in the local press in 1872 for refusing to seek expert advice about possible design flaws after the collapse during construction of a new covered market.²³ Market authorities were, however, very willing to learn from what was happening in other towns, including those in continental Europe. In 1882 a delegation from Leeds visited Paris, Antwerp, Brussels and Rotterdam to view cattle markets and abattoirs.²⁴ Five years later, faced with requests for rent reductions, Bolton’s town clerk sought information from five other Lancashire towns about the charges they made for shops and stalls²⁵ while in 1913 the market authorities at Wakefield asked the market superintendent from Derby to advise on the better administration of their market.²⁶

The day-to-day running of most markets, including collecting rents and tolls, supervising the placing of stalls and dealing with minor disputes, was in the hands of the market superintendent. A good market superintendent was invaluable, but it was not always easy to satisfy both tenants and market authority. There were complaints from tenants in Leeds in 1892 about the superintendent’s lack of courtesy²⁷ while in Birmingham in the previous year the market inspector had been dismissed for uncivil conduct towards butchers and fishmongers. He

²² RCMRT, vol. IV (P.P 1888, LV), Q. 6573.

²³ *Preston Chronicle*, 20 Apr. 1872, p.4, cols 5-6; 27 Apr. 1872, p. 2, cols 1-5.

²⁴ West Yorkshire Archive Service (hereafter WYAS), Leeds, Borough of Leeds, Report on Cattle and Fish Markets, 1882, Acc. 3515 2/1.

²⁵ Bolton Archives (hereafter BA), Bolton Corporation Markets Committee, Minutes 1882-88, AB 12/1/5. p. 290.

²⁶ WYAS, Wakefield, Wakefield Corporation, Property Committee, Minutes 1911-15, WWC 20/3, p. 233.

²⁷ WYAS (Leeds), Leeds Market, Report Book of Market Superintendent, 1891-94, LC/Mkts, Acc. 2777/1.

retaliated by accusing the superintendent of failing to seize diseased meat out of fear of offending the butchers.²⁸ Victorian markets were large and complex organisations and those responsible for their management had to balance the interests of traders, customers, other retailers and ultimately the market owner. In a well-managed market this balance was achieved, together with keeping good order, monitoring hygiene and quality standards and making a profit.

II

A key concern of the market owner was that the market should be financially sound. In the case of company-owned markets this usually meant paying a good dividend to investors. Judged on this criterion, Cannock was initially a very successful market. The Cannock Market Company was incorporated in 1868 with a potential capital of £2,000 in £1 shares.²⁹ A year later, a small market hall had been built at a cost of £1279, including land purchase, financed by £1117 share capital and a £162 loan. A dividend of 7½ per cent was declared in 1870. Two years later the hall was enlarged and by 1877 the dividend had risen to 13¾ per cent. This was the high point of profitability and dividends then gradually declined, settling at 7½ per cent for much of the 1880s and early 1890s and then falling to 5 per cent. Although the hall remained profitable, it was increasingly being let for bazaars, auctions and to clubs.³⁰ The company was wound up in 1919.³¹ At Wakefield, where the company was accused of poor management, dividends peaked at 8 per cent in 1877, but then fell to under 5 per cent in the 1880s.³² It was said of Rochdale that the company had not been a very lucrative one, with dividends never exceeding 6 per cent.³³ The

²⁸ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 5 Jan. 1891, p. 3, col. 6; 9 Oct. 1891, p. 6, col. 7.

²⁹ TNA, Board of Trade, Files of Joint Stock Companies, Cannock Market Company, BT41/14404/4005.

³⁰ Staffordshire Archives, Cannock Market Hall Company, Directors' Minutes, 1868-97, D4880/1.

³¹ TNA, BT41/14404/4005.

³² RCMRT, vol. IV (P.P. 1888, LV), Q. 4530.

³³ RCMRT, vol. II (P.P. 1888, LIII), QQ. 4669-70.

Sheffield markets produced net profits of around £10,000 a year for the Duke of Norfolk by the late 1880s.³⁴ Markets could be lucrative, but were not necessarily a safe investment and there is clear evidence of declining returns in the 1880s and after.

The position was slightly more complex for local authority markets. No-one really doubted that income from the markets as a whole should cover expenditure. Was, however, it necessary for each market to make a profit or could more successful ones subsidise those whose existence was justified on other grounds? Also, if money had been borrowed for market improvements, should income also cover interest charges and some capital repayment? Moreover, was it reasonable to expect markets to produce a sufficient surplus to help reduce rates; and should market rents and tolls be set at a level that did not give market traders an unfair advantage over rate-paying shopkeepers? The corporation of Blackburn, which acknowledged that the markets provided substantial revenue, justified their position to the Royal Commission. They believed that, 'the market tolls ought to bear some fair proportion to the amount which shopkeepers generally have to pay for rent and rates'. Limiting tolls to actual expenditure would be unlikely to lead to price reductions, but would necessitate an increase in rates and thus benefit non-ratepaying market traders at the expense of ratepaying shopkeepers.³⁵ The assistant commissioner commended this 'well reasoned' answer. Other local authorities placed more emphasis on the public benefits of markets. For example, the town clerk of Burnley told the Commission that, 'the wish of the corporation is that the markets should be made the best possible markets in the interests of the market tenants, and particularly of the consumers ... the Burnley markets ... have not been a financial success, and they are not looked upon as revenue bearing in aid of the rates'.³⁶

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Q.4847

³⁵ RCMRT, vol. IX (P.P 1890-91, XXXVIII), Q. 14,422.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Q. 13,288.

Attempting to assess the profitability of individual markets, let alone the return on capital invested, is fraught with difficulty. Even where it is possible from local authority records to identify income from each separate market, expenditure was usually reported for the markets as a whole. Also, as the Royal Commission noted, the cost of managing markets tended to be understated because no allowance was made for that proportion of general local authority expenditure which should be allocated to markets. On the other hand the amount of capital sunk in markets could be overstated by the inclusion of land purchased for general improvements including markets, and by putting a current value on land purchased for market purposes in the distant past. In listing expenditure figures for a sample of markets, the commissioners omitted interest payments and amounts allocated to capital repayment presumably because they felt there was no consistency in how these were reported.³⁷ Table 2 shows the commissioners' figures for income, current expenditure, capital expenditure and return on capital for those markets in the sample that this article considers. Had the current expenditure figures included payment of interest and contributions to a sinking fund, the surplus would have been substantially reduced or even wiped out in some instances, such as Burton-on-Trent. In other places, like Derby, no capital expenditure seems to have been allocated to the market accounts, with the entire surplus being paid into the borough fund.³⁸

Table 2 about here

So far as it is possible to generalize, it is fair to say that the great majority of markets produced a surplus of income over expenditure, even including interest charges and repayment of debt. Some older market halls, where debts had been repaid or written off, could be relied on to provide a steady income stream that could help fund future improvements. For example,

³⁷ RCMRT, vol. XI (P.P 1890-91, XXXVII), p. 66.

³⁸ RCMRT, vol. VIII (P.P 1890-91, XXXVIII), QQ. 16,992-93. It was claimed that the entire market debt had been repaid, but that total borough debt was £220,000 with the market tolls pledged against this.

when Chester city council was discussing the likely profitability of a possible extension to its markets in 1881, nearby Birkenhead was cited as a case where the markets regularly produced a return of 7 to 8 per cent.³⁹ Similarly it was said of Birmingham's markets in 1885 that every additional outlay seemed to produce a more than full return in income, although two years later fears were being expressed that profits were falling and that the 'days of markets seemed to have gone by'.⁴⁰ There is some evidence that these fears were justified: annual profits from the Birmingham markets averaged £6,200 in the years 1877-81, falling to £5,100 in 1882-87.⁴¹ At Bolton, income from the markets rose steadily in the 1870s, but by 1888 had fallen by 20 per cent from its peak. Market hall rents, which made up the bulk of the income, fell by just under 40 per cent.⁴² Following investment in new shops in the 1890s, income recovered and substantially exceeded its 1878 peak in the first decade of the twentieth century.⁴³

In the absence of pro-active management and renewed investment, market hall income was generally static or even declining towards the end of the period under consideration. It was said of the market at Middlesbrough at the end of the nineteenth century that it had not grown with the town's population and suffered as a result of competition from other retailers there.⁴⁴ At Burton-on-Trent, where a small market hall had been opened in 1883, annual income was around £1900 in the 1890s, peaking at £1969 in 1903-04 and falling to £1487 in 1913-14. Largely because of interest charges and repayment of debt the market regularly made a loss of just over £100 a year, but moved into profit at the end of the period when repayment charges

³⁹ *Cheshire Observer*, 16 July 1881, p. 6, col. 4

⁴⁰ *Birmingham Post*, 4 July 1885, p.4, col. 7; 2 Mar. 1887, p.7, col. 3.

⁴¹ *Birmingham Post*, 7 Mar. 1888, p. 7, col. 3.

⁴² RCMRT, vol. IX (P.P. 1890-91 XXXVIII), p. 244.

⁴³ Bolton Archives, Markets, Miscellaneous, ABMA 19/5.

⁴⁴ *Northern Echo*, 1 July 1899, p. 2, col. 7.

diminished.⁴⁵ At Burnley, market income changed little between 1894 and 1904, but then began to increase gradually. The market hall contributed about 40 per cent of revenue and the outdoor market around 60 per cent with little change over time.⁴⁶ Leicester was unusual in that most of the retail market was held in the open air, with a small market hall providing stalls for florists, haberdashers, butter sellers and a few others. The markets were profitable, particularly the open retail market, income from which rose by nearly 25 per cent between 1900 and 1914 while that from the market hall fell by 20 per cent in the 1900s, from 8 per cent of the combined revenue to just 6 per cent. In the market hall itself, income from florists more than halved while that from haberdashers increased.⁴⁷

It was suggested at Leicester's markets committee in 1890 that the town needed to invest in a large covered market.⁴⁸ The decision not to do so was probably a wise one. Other towns did, however, invest heavily in the 1890s and 1900s. When work on the new market hall and arcade started in Halifax in 1892 the total cost was estimated at £105,000, including £44,105 for land purchase. There were already those who thought the markets would be a white elephant but the chairman of the markets committee justified the expenditure on the grounds of anticipated profits sometime in the future coupled with the creation of a valuable asset to the town.⁴⁹ When the markets were opened in 1896 the cost was reported to have been £120,000, mainly financed

⁴⁵ Lichfield Record Office, Borough of Burton-on-Trent, Cemetery, Fire Brigade, Markets and Fairs Committee, Minutes, 1888-1917, D23/1/3/5-8.

⁴⁶ LA, Burnley Market Committee, Minutes 1893-1915, CBBU 34/1-4.

⁴⁷ LRO, Superintendent of Markets, Quarterly Receipts, 17D72/1; General Market, Summary of Receipts, 17D72/4.

⁴⁸ *Leicester Chronicle*, 1 Nov. 1890, p. 3, cols 4-5.

⁴⁹ *Leeds Mercury*, 7 Oct. 1892, p. 3, col. 5.

by borrowing.⁵⁰ The markets were just about profitable, with the surplus of income over expenditure occasionally exceeding £1,000 in the first years of operation but falling to £200 or less by the early 1910s. The return on capital invested was under one per cent.⁵¹ Leeds invested heavily in its markets in the nineteenth century and early twentieth, including £40,000 on major improvements to Kirkgate market in the 1870s and £116,000 in a virtual rebuilding between 1901 and 1904. The total cost of improvements to all the city's markets in the 1890s and 1900s was just under a quarter of a million pounds. The new Kirkgate market was arguably even more impressive than the market in Halifax, but there were nagging doubts about whether the expenditure was justified. At a stormy meeting with tenants in 1911 the city council rejected requests for rent reductions on the grounds that the markets did not pay one per cent on the money expended.⁵² There had been doubts when the plans were first mooted. Alderman Archie Scarr, known as the 'monarch of the market', had warned in 1896 against pursuing a policy of improvements that might ruin the best market in England.⁵³ Income from Kirkgate market rose steadily in the decade after its opening, but it only began to produce a significant surplus (of over £4,000) in aid of the rates in 1911-12 and that was largely absorbed by losses on other markets.⁵⁴

Taking a market into public ownership may have been good policy in terms of ensuring that it was run for the benefit of traders and customers rather than shareholders or a private individual, but did not necessarily make financial sense. During the protracted negotiations in the mid 1870s between Sheffield corporation and the Duke of Norfolk's agent the proposed

⁵⁰ *Leeds Mercury*, 27 July 1896, p. 4, col. 8; WYAS, Calderdale, Halifax Markets and Fairs Committee, Minutes, 1888-98, CMT1/HXM/332-33.

⁵¹ WYAS, Calderdale, Minutes, 1898-1913, CMT1/HXM/339-343.

⁵² Burt and Grady, *Kirkgate Market*, pp12-26.

⁵³ *Leeds Mercury*, 14 Apr. 1896, p. 3, col. 4.

⁵⁴ WYAS, Leeds, Leeds Market, Superintendent's annual reports to markets committee Acc 3379/6/1-9; Acc2777/1.

purchase price was criticised as being far too high. It was said that Sheffield was being asked to pay £8 4s per square yard compared with the £2 14s Leeds and the £1 9s Halifax had paid earlier in the century. The markets would have to be operated at a loss to the ratepayers at a time when the need for covered markets was decreasing because of the spread of shops.⁵⁵ The city council eventually purchased the markets for £526,000 in 1899.⁵⁶ Interest charges and repayment of loans meant that the markets ran at a loss in the first few years of local authority control, but increased income saw this reduce from £7276 in 1900-01 to £1457 in 1904-05.⁵⁷ The market property, particularly the Fitzalan (meat and fish) market, represented a valuable city centre asset. The city's markets committee recommended finding a new and more lucrative use for this market but seem to have been thwarted by opposition from the tenants.⁵⁸ It would be hard to justify these very large investments in markets if the sole criterion was return on capital. Inconsistent accounting practices, as noted by the Royal Commission, made comparisons difficult and supposed large profits were not always what they seemed. Most markets did produce a surplus, but the assertion by Schmiechen and Carls that 'profits had become lavish by 1900' is too sweeping and too optimistic.⁵⁹ The justification for market investment was that markets were an important public amenity, not that they were generally a significant source of revenue.

It is, however, apparent both from Table 2 and other examples discussed in this section that there was wide variation in the profitability or otherwise of markets. The nature and size of the town does not seem to have been significant. Nor was location, except in the case of

⁵⁵ Brittain, *Corporation and the markets*, pp.3-10.

⁵⁶ Sheffield Archives (hereafter SA), Sheffield Market Act, 1899, ACM13/9/7.

⁵⁷ SA, City of Sheffield, Markets Committee, 1902-08, CA-MAR/1/1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Schmiechen and Carls, *British market hall*, p.44.

Middlesbrough where the town expanded southwards in the middle decades of the nineteenth century leaving the market somewhat stranded at its northern boundary. The mayor saw little point in trying to revive it: 'I think it better to let butchers supply the town than provide markets'.⁶⁰ Governance and management were clearly important. The contrasting performance of the markets at the neighbouring towns of Blackburn and Burnley can be explained by the differing attitudes of the local authority: Blackburn sought a significant profit; Burnley to provide a public good. This begs the question of why the authorities in two quite similar towns adopted such contrasting policies; the sources unfortunately do not provide an answer. There was also a sharp contrast between Wakefield and Cannock, the two smallest towns in the sample. The poorly managed market at Wakefield was not going to produce the same return as the well-managed one at Cannock. Some market authorities were perhaps simply too ambitious. Bolton's market hall, built in the 1850s, was widely regarded as a model establishment, but the amount invested was arguably more than could be justified in terms of income received. The same was almost certainly true of the very large amounts invested by west Yorkshire towns at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth. Later market halls, like those at Burton or Halifax, also faced much more competition from other types of retailer than did those built in the first half of the nineteenth century. The earlier halls, like Birkenhead, had more chance of paying off borrowing in a less competitive environment and so needed only to make a surplus of income over current expenditure in the later years of the century. The more competition there was from other retailers, the harder it was to justify very large public investment in market halls. This is explored further in the next section.

III

The simplest argument for public investment in retail markets was the need to ensure the provision of basic goods, particularly fresh food, at fair prices to growing urban populations.

⁶⁰ RCMRT, vol. IV (P.P 1888, LV), Q. 7024.

There is a good case for saying that the earlier nineteenth-century market halls, in places like Liverpool, Newcastle or Birmingham, did just that.⁶¹ The provision of a market hall was one of the first priorities of the improvement commissioners in Birkenhead in the 1830s, and a larger hall was needed by the 1840s.⁶² By the last third of the century, however, there was growing criticism that in at least some market halls there were not only problems with occupancy, but also that too high a proportion of tenants were miscellaneous retailers. For example, the *Birmingham Daily Post* complained in the early 1870s that Birmingham's market hall was filled with fancy goods and similar dealers because the town's inhabitants preferred to buy their necessities at private shops.⁶³ During a discussion at Sheffield's town council concerning the proposed purchase of the market rights and premises, one member argued that retail, as opposed to wholesale, markets were of no practical utility, describing the Norfolk market hall as a 'toy shop' and the Fitzalan market (in many ways a 'traditional' market dominated by butchers, fishmongers and poultry and game dealers) as a 'rat warren and cess pool'.⁶⁴ At Leeds, there were complaints that market gardeners and produce sellers, for whom it was argued the market was primarily intended, were being squeezed out by second-hand dealers and ironmongers. There would be no need to extend Kirkgate market if it was used for its proper purpose; and there was no justification in spending money to create a market for shopkeepers.⁶⁵ The small second market

⁶¹ As well as Schmiechen and Carls, see Morrison, *English shops and shopping*, chapter 6; Stobart, *Spend, spend, spend!*, pp. 118-24; and Mitchell, *Tradition and innovation in English retailing*, chapter 8 for a discussion of the first wave of market halls. Grady, 'Profit, property interests and public spirit' explores the rather mixed experience of Leeds in the 1820s.

⁶² Mitchell, *Tradition and innovation*, pp. 158-59. Market provision was, however, a much lower priority in Middlesbrough, the prime example of a Victorian new industrial town.

⁶³ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 17 Aug. 1872, p. 5, col. 2.

⁶⁴ *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*, 15 Jan. 1876, p. 7, col. 3.

⁶⁵ RCMRT, vol. IV (P.P. 1888 vol. LV, QQ.6640-42).

hall at Blackburn, originally built as a fish market but soon adapted for the sale of dry goods, had only three tenants occupying its 16 stalls in 1898 and was essentially a shop, while the privately owned market at Rochdale was described as a bazaar in 1911.⁶⁶

Tables 3 to 5 about here

Criticisms of this sort probably represented a minority view, particularly when much civic pride as well as money was being invested in the construction or enlargement of retail market halls, but were perhaps indicative of changing attitudes towards public funding of retail space and the perception of the market as an unquestioned public good.. Was there, however, any truth in the claim that market halls were becoming, in Deborah Hodson's phrase, 'the municipal store', or, as critics might have argued, publicly subsidised bazaars offering unfair competition to shop retailers? Tables 3 to 5 use evidence from trade directories to attempt to establish in very broad terms the trade composition of a selection of retail market halls and in three cases to look at changes over time.⁶⁷ Table 3 offers a snapshot of the trader mix in 11 market halls in the period 1881-1901. While it is immediately apparent that there was a wide variation between markets, some generalisations are possible. Traders selling food or drink (not necessarily fresh produce) accounted for over half the total in all but two markets, but only at the very small market at Burton-on-Trent did they account for over three-quarters, with butchers being predominant. Shops or stalls selling clothing, textiles and household goods were present in all the markets, but only at Burnley market and in the Norfolk market hall in Sheffield did they represent a majority of traders. The 'other' category generally included a number of market gardeners, plant dealers

⁶⁶ *Weekly Standard and Express*, 7 May 1898, p.3, col. 3; *Rochdale Times*, 27 May 1911.

⁶⁷ The use of directories to provide evidence as to who was trading in the markets means that this section is largely confined to market halls because traders in open or covered markets were generally not recorded. It is also the case the trade labels attached to particular traders may not have fully reflected the range of goods they offered.

and florists. Textiles and clothing tended to be more significant in Lancashire and Yorkshire than in the midlands while at Birmingham the household goods category included eight jewellers. With the exception of Burton-on-Trent, all of these markets were much more diverse than the classic farmers' market, but there was still a place for those selling fresh produce, meat and fish alongside a number of grocers and refreshment rooms.⁶⁸

Table 4 looks at changes over time at Birmingham, Bolton and Leeds. At Birmingham, textile and clothing traders disappeared from the market hall between 1867 and 1903, while the proportion of gardeners, nurserymen and florists, often using the market as a secondary outlet, increased. The proportion of food and drink and household goods traders remained fairly constant. The trend at Bolton was for food and drink traders to be replaced by those selling household goods or trading as bazaars. This is consistent with what seems to have been happening in the much smaller market halls of north Lancashire market towns. The changes at Leeds Kirkgate market are puzzling. The slight increase in the proportion of household goods traders between 1872 and 1881 is not unexpected given trends elsewhere, but the increase in the proportion of food and drink traders at the expense in clothing and household goods after the reconstruction of the market is surprising. One explanation might be that these types of trader, who had to leave the market while it was being rebuilt, chose not to return in 1904 but to trade instead from shop premises. If so, this suggests that the new Kirkgate market more closely resembled a 'traditional' market than had either its predecessor market, or the markets of most other large towns. Butchers, fishmongers and fruiterers dominated the market, but still accounted for only a tiny proportion of the total number of such traders in the town as a whole.

Even though certain trades might dominate a market, almost all market halls were used by a very wide variety of trades. Table 5 shows the number of different trades in the market halls

⁶⁸ The number of butchers varied greatly: in some towns like Birmingham and Leeds most traded from shops whereas the new Halifax market made provision for over 30 butchers' shops.

of Birmingham, Birkenhead, Leeds and Sheffield with an indication of whether or not this was their sole business. The evidence from these markets is that their market shop or stall was the sole outlet for around three-quarters of traders in most markets. Directory evidence suggests that in some cases a market stall could provide a low-cost entry point for a trader starting up in business. This was the case for Archie Scarr who in 1876 was trading only from Kirkgate open market, but by the late 1880s had two shop premises in Leeds and one in each of Barnsley and Wakefield.⁶⁹ In other instances the directories indicate that some traders started with a shop and then added a market stall as an additional outlet. It was common for market gardeners and similar traders to have business premises in addition to those in the market, and not particularly unusual for butchers and poultry or game dealers to have a shop as well as their market premises: this was why the proportion of traders with other shops was higher in the Fitzalan market than elsewhere. In each market there were usually one or two traders who had two or even more shops as well as their market outlet; and by the first decade of the twentieth century some early multiples like Liptons were to be found in a number of markets. It was also becoming increasingly common for a single business to occupy several shops or stalls. For example, Peter McMahon, provision dealer at Birkenhead had a block of five shops in the market hall in 1894, while at Burnley in 1899 one of the town's principal booksellers, Lupton Brothers, had two shops in the market and premises on Manchester Road, and one of the hardware dealers had three shops in addition to the one in the market.

The implication is that markets and shops were often not all that different, particularly when market halls included shops as was common from the late nineteenth century onwards. How important then was the retail market in terms of overall retail provision? It is abundantly clear from directories that even in trades that would be traditionally associated with markets, like butcher, fishmonger, fruiterer or poulterer, substantially more traded from shops than from

⁶⁹ *McCorquodale & Co's Topographical and Commercial Directory of Leeds and Neighbourhood* (Leeds: McCorquodale & Co, 1876); Leeds Local Studies Library, folder on Leeds Industries.

market premises; and that the proportion of clothes dealers, household goods dealers and luxury traders operating from markets was miniscule even if examples of almost any trade could be found in a retail market somewhere.⁷⁰ There were also persistent complaints about the difficulty of filling all the shops and stalls provided in market halls.⁷¹ The stalls in the gallery at Derby's market hall had long proved hard to let: in 1898 rents were reduced and anyone willing to move from the open market in Morledge to the gallery was offered a rent-free month.⁷² There were similar problems at Bolton where in 1889 the galleries were empty, except for one tenant. A letter to the *Bolton Daily Chronicle* in the same year argued that there was too much market accommodation in the borough and that the empty space in the market hall could be used by moving the main wholesale fruit and vegetable market there. Three years later the market superintendent was advising prospective tenants that there were many shops and stalls to let.⁷³ At Birkenhead, there was so much empty space in the retail market hall that in 1887 the borough surveyor was asked to report as to the possibility of using one-third of the hall for a wholesale market.⁷⁴ At Middlesbrough, where markets had never been of great importance, the butchers'

⁷⁰ For example, of the 63 fishmongers listed in the 1867 Birmingham directory, only 15 had premises in the market hall; fewer than half of Bolton's butchers listed in the 1876-77 directory traded from the market hall even though it was widely regarded as an excellent example of a town market; according to the 1872-73 Leeds directory butchers were dispersed throughout the town and almost entirely absent from Kirkgate market.

⁷¹ By contrast, there was strong competition throughout the period for vacant stalls at Leicester's open market.

⁷² Derbyshire Record Office, Derby Borough Council, Markets Committee, Minutes 1891-1906, D4538/19/4, pp. 316-25.

⁷³ RCMRT, vol. IX (P.P 1890-91, XXXVIII), Q. 11,655; BA, Bolton Market, letter of 5 April 1889, ABMA 19/5; Market superintendent letter book 1892-95, ABMA 20/1.

⁷⁴ Wirral Archives. Birkenhead Corporation Market Committee, Minutes 1886-90, B/046/3, p. 133.

market was said to be half empty in 1888.⁷⁵ When the Leeds central market burnt down in 1893, there was widespread opposition to suggestions that it might be rebuilt. According to the chairman of the markets committee it had ceased to be a market and was simply a group of shops: it would be better to clear the site and use it for street improvements.⁷⁶ Shops and stalls inside the new Kirkgate market proved fairly easy to let even though the rents had initially to be cut by one-third; outside shops were harder to let and the restaurant was still unoccupied in 1907 when it was offered to the Salvation Army for use as a temperance hotel.⁷⁷ The popular image of busy markets thronged with working-class shoppers, particularly on Saturday nights, is not necessarily false, but can conceal the reality of day-to-day activity in many market halls.

At Burton-on-Trent, where the borough markets were consistently loss making in the 1890s, the markets committee decided to investigate the reasons for the decline in retail markets. They identified seven: farmers had ceased to send butter to the market; the growth of co-operative stores; the growth in the number of houses converted to shops; the increase in home deliveries; the vast amount of hawking; new or improved markets in nearby towns; and the rise of multiple stores selling goods of a type formerly sold in markets.⁷⁸ Most, if not all of these, were beyond their control. Increased competition from other types of retailer was noted in other towns. The growing co-operative movement was said to be a particular issue in the north-west and was regarded as one cause of the troubled state of Bolton's markets in the 1880s. It was claimed that there over 13,000 members of co-operatives in the area and that working people were increasingly dealing in these stores rather than in the market.⁷⁹ There were similar

⁷⁵ RCMRT, vol. IV (P.P 1888, LV), p. 510.

⁷⁶ *Leeds Mercury*, 7 Oct. 1893, p. 9, cols 6-7.

⁷⁷ WYAS, Leeds, Market superintendent's reports to market committee, LC/Mkts, Acc. 3379, 6/6-8.

⁷⁸ Lichfield Record Office, Burton-on-Trent, Cemetery, Fire Brigade, Markets and Fairs Committee, Minutes 1896-1902, D23/1/3/6, pp. 343-44.

⁷⁹ RCMRT, vol. VIII (P.P 1890-91, XXXVIII), Q.11,640.

complaints at Rochdale, 'Rochdale is a great town for co-operative stores, and the bulk of the working classes go to these stores for provisions. Of course the price elsewhere does not matter to them, because they participate in the profits'.⁸⁰ The role of the co-ops may have been exaggerated: they clearly competed with regard to bread, dry goods, bacon, cheese, some clothing and some house furnishings. By about 1900 many co-ops also had butchery departments but few sold perishable items like greengrocery or fish. Competition from hawkers was more significant for these.⁸¹

As well as competing with market traders, hawkers and street traders were also often regarded as a nuisance. At Leicester, there was pressure in 1905 for the authorities to institute a proper licensing system: as well as paying nothing for the right to trade, the goods they sold were frequently unfit for human consumption.⁸² The issue of hawking caused particular difficulties at Rochdale because the company which owned and ran the market was unable to obtain powers to licence and thus control them. Instead, it tried to ban hawkers completely but without success, partly because the police and magistrates tended to sympathize with the hawkers, not the company. It was said in 1888 that the town was overrun with hawkers, but also that they had an important role both in selling necessities at lower prices than other traders and, by taking goods to customers, providing a service to those who lived at a distance from the market. As far as the market company was concerned, however, hawkers were primarily responsible for the growing number of vacant stalls in the market and therefore the decline in profitability.⁸³ Street traders

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, Q. 11,284

⁸¹ Autobiographies often mention street trading in these items, including greengrocers with established rounds selling from a horse and cart (for example, Hird, *Mirfield*, p. 61; Williams, *36 Stewart Street*, p.10).

⁸² LRO, Leicester Corporation, Markets Committee, Minutes 1905-08, CM25/3, between pp. 57-8.

⁸³ RCMRT, vol II (P.P. 1888 , LIII), QQ. 4685-4830.

were also perceived as a nuisance in early twentieth century Sheffield because of the damage they were alleged to do to town centre shops and markets. Prosecutions were common.⁸⁴

It was no doubt easier to blame someone else when markets were facing difficulties, rather than address issues to do with the markets themselves. It is, however, clear that retail markets faced significant competition from other outlets and represented only a very small part of the total retail provision in any given place. Would it have mattered if they had not existed, or at least if so much energy and money had not been invested in building or re-building large market halls in the late nineteenth century? Simply in terms of the availability of necessities and other goods, the answer is surely no. There were more than enough shops and hawkers to supply the needs of urban populations. Moreover, the increasing number of shops in the suburbs of larger towns meant that there were often more convenient places to buy basic goods than the centrally located markets. Working-class autobiographies are ambivalent about the importance of markets. Saturday night markets were clearly enjoyed as a place to socialise and be entertained. They were also an important source of cheap food, particularly meat and fresh produce as prices were reduced as the evening wore on. Edith Hinson claimed that nothing was bought from local shopkeepers in Stockport on Friday and Saturday market days. Yet autobiographies also contain detailed descriptions of local ‘corner’ shops and of street traders, implying that these were the source of most daily food purchases.⁸⁵

IV

It would be wrong, however, to be too negative about markets and markets halls. It was said that at Leeds prices in the market for poultry, vegetables and game were 25 per cent cheaper than in the shops; meat was said to be cheaper in the Middlesbrough market but not as good;

⁸⁴ SA, City of Sheffield, Markets Committee, 1908-23, CA-MAR/1/2.

⁸⁵ As well as Hird and Williams (note 78), see Hinson, *I Remember*; Marsh, *Shopping in Denton*; and Foley, *A Bolton Childhood*.

while at Halifax there was little difference between shop and market prices.⁸⁶ There is no evidence that the competition offered by a market exerted downward pressure on prices, but this cannot be ruled out. Publicly provided markets were also important for quality control (and control generally). Market halls in particular were controlled spaces subject to a wide range of legally enforceable regulations. Some of these were about food quality and Schmiechen and Carls have argued that physical features of market halls, such as tiled counter tops and running water, coupled with rigorous inspections led to an improvement in food hygiene.⁸⁷ Market authorities took their responsibilities seriously, but striking the right balance between protecting the public and not being unfair to traders was not always easy. For example two Derby butchers were given notice to quit their shops in the market hall in 1871 because of bad meat; four years later, however, another butcher was allowed to keep his shop despite a conviction for bad meat.⁸⁸ At Bolton the markets committee accepted a recommendation from the sanitary committee that only meat from animals slaughtered in the borough would be permitted on butchers' stalls.⁸⁹ The Birmingham markets committee instituted in 1878 a formal system of consulting a 'trade jury' made up of butchers if there was a dispute between the markets inspector and a butcher about the wholesomeness or otherwise of meat offered for sale. It was said that over a 10 year period the number of referrals declined mainly because it was increasingly hard to get away with selling bad meat. Leeds had a similar system.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ RCMRT, vol. IV (P.P. 1888, IV), Q. 6695; Q. 7084; Q. 4282

⁸⁷ Schmiechen and Carls, *British market hall*, pp. 179-80. See also Baics, 'Is access to food a public good' for the positive contribution made by markets to New York's public health in the nineteenth century.

⁸⁸ Derbyshire Record Office, Derby Borough Council, Markets Committee, Minutes 1865-81, D4538/19/2, pp. 175, 263.

⁸⁹ BA, Borough of Bolton, Markets Committee, Minutes 1870-77, AB12/1/3, pp. 132-33.

⁹⁰ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 9 Feb. 1888, p. 5, cols 3-4.

None of this did away with complaints about quality and cleanliness. Some smells were hard to eliminate: it was claimed that in Birmingham many ladies would not come into the fruit and flower market because of the smell of fish.⁹¹ In some cases the market was simply dirty: the chief travelling veterinary inspector was scathing in his comments about the open market place in Leicester in 1880; while the market at Leeds was described by one member of the markets committee as ‘the most discreditable-looking’ one in the country in 1895.⁹² Nor were market authorities always much more successful in enforcing other regulations. Many things were banned in market halls, including smoking and dogs in most instances, while in the adjoining open markets prohibitions included a shooting gallery at Blackburn, the sale of coconuts at Burnley and a boxing booth at Middlesbrough.⁹³ Reality rarely lived up to the ideal. At Leeds, the superintendent’s fines book recorded a variety of offences including obstructing the passageways in the market hall, using abusive language, gambling, opening shops and stalls on Good Friday and having open fires in their shops.⁹⁴ Ten Leicester butchers were given notice to quit following a fight; music from shows and roundabouts on market days at Burton was regarded as a nuisance by local shopkeepers; boys were caught smoking in Derby’s market hall; and aggressive sales tactics were complained of in several places, including Wakefield.⁹⁵ All this may have disturbed the market authorities, but it is at least possible that many traders and customers preferred the lively, and even boisterous, atmosphere of the traditional or street market to the sterile and

⁹¹ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 20 Dec. 1890, p. 7, col. 5.

⁹² LRO, Leicester Tolls Committee, 1879-93, CM36/9, 9 Nov 1880; *Leeds Mercury*, 8 Aug. 1895, p. 3, col. 6.

⁹³ LA, Blackburn Market Committee Minutes, 1874-88, CBBN1/9/3, 23 Jan 1879; RCMRT, vol. IX (P.P 1890-91, XXXVIII), Q. 13,091; Teesside Archives, Middlesbrough Streets Committee 1885-89, CB/M/C/2/91, p. 230.

⁹⁴ WYAS Leeds, Market Fines Book, 1892-1922, LC/Mkts Acc/3379/2.

⁹⁵ LRO, Leicester Corporation, Tolls Committee 1883-86, CM36/10, 20 July 1886; Lichfield R.O, Burton Markets etc Committee, 1896-1902, D23/1/3/6, pp. 317-18; Derbyshire R.O. Derby Markets Committee, Minutes, 1891-1906, p.566; WYAS Wakefield, Wakefield Corporate Property Committee, 1903-11, WWC/20/2, p. 221.

perhaps soulless market hall. If so there may have been cultural as well as economic reasons why Leicester's open market flourished and Derby's street market in the Morledge was preferred to its market hall.⁹⁶

Even if sometimes soulless, market halls were undoubtedly a very visible statement of civic pride. When the reconstruction of Kirkgate market in Leeds was finally agreed by the council, the local newspaper commented that the proposals would create a market worthy of the city.⁹⁷ Three years earlier the Duke and Duchess of York had opened the new market in Halifax.⁹⁸ These were among the most spectacular of the final wave of market halls constructed or substantially improved in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth. Yet from the 1820s onwards market hall had made a statement. Not only were they big, but many took advantage of the possibilities inherent in the use of iron and glass to create huge interior spaces, while maintaining a more conventional exterior appearance through the use of brick or stone. Heraldic and other ornamental motifs added to the essential seriousness of the building, possibly making links to local history.⁹⁹ Together with town halls, public libraries, museums, and other buildings dedicated to serious leisure pursuits, market halls manifested the self-confidence of the Victorian industrial town and city. If not necessarily a commercial success, they were an undoubted cultural triumph.

V

⁹⁶ This was not only the case in England. Lohmeier, '*Bürgerliche gesellschaft*' notes that many market traders refused to move into the new Berlin halls and that the amount of street trading increased after they were opened.

⁹⁷ *Leeds Mercury* 7 Jan. 1899, p.3, col. 2.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 27 July 1896, p. 4, col. 8.

⁹⁹ As well as Schmiechen and Carls, *British market hall*, see Dobraszcyk, 'Victorian market halls'.

In 1900, a sub-committee of the Preston markets committee reported on best practice regarding markets after gathering information from several Lancashire towns. There was a general consensus against covered market halls on the grounds that they were occupied by dealers in everything but market produce to the detriment of legitimate shopkeepers. They also recommended against setting aside any additional land for general market use other than a limited area for fishmongers and retail butchers.¹⁰⁰ The evidence presented in this article supports this rather cautious approach.

Over twenty years ago, Martin Phillips argued persuasively for a contextualized approach to the evolution of markets and shops in nineteenth-century Britain, claiming that there were no convincing general explanations for the geography of market improvement.¹⁰¹ There is some truth in this, but evidence from the towns considered in this article indicates some common features. The success of a market, whether financial or in terms of high occupancy rates, had little to do with the size or characteristics of the town in question. Nor was the location of the market particularly significant, except in that as towns expanded the disadvantages for regular access of having one large central retail market became more apparent. More important were issues of governance and management including the policies adopted by the market authorities and in particular whether they saw the market as primarily a source of revenue or as a public good. By the early twentieth century competition from neighbourhood shops, co-operative stores and multiples made it much harder to justify investment in market halls, particularly if a significant proportion of tenants were selling dry goods, clothing and hardware. At the same time, working-class consumers continued to patronise markets, particularly on Fridays and Saturdays, enjoying them as places of entertainment and leisure as well as for the purchase of cheap goods.

¹⁰⁰ LA, Preston Borough Markets and Town Hall Committee, 1899-1909, CBP33/8, p.16.

¹⁰¹ Phillips, 'Evolution of markets and shops' p. 61.

The evidence also suggests some other broad conclusions. First, retail markets taken as a whole were not becoming obsolete in the later decades of the nineteenth century. They continued to have a place in the overall retail environment and could still flourish. Secondly, wholesale markets, with which this article has not been concerned, were increasing in importance and consuming significant amounts of local authority expenditure.¹⁰² Thirdly, however, there are searching questions to be asked about the most visible and dramatic manifestation of the retail market, the Victorian market hall. They were expensive to build and although income almost always exceeded operating costs, the return on capital outlay, usually financed by borrowing, could be so small as to invite criticism. Although it was something of an exaggeration to claim that they were ‘bazaars’ or ‘toy shops’, a significant proportion of traders in many halls, and a majority in some, were in direct competition with shopkeepers paying commercial rents and rates. Some citizens and councillors regarded this as unfair. Nor is there any evidence that market halls were essential for the provision of fresh meat, fish, fruit or vegetables: there were plenty of shops selling such goods, and numbers of such shops were increasing. The commercial case for market halls, though not necessarily for retail markets in general, was weak. The visual impact of most market halls was undeniable and they were iconic civic buildings, as some are to this day. There is a strong case for saying that towns like Leicester and Preston made the right choice when they resisted the temptation to invest heavily in market halls and focused instead on operating a more traditional open market. Market halls may not have been white elephants, but neither were they a consumer paradise: a necessary part of retail provision in the first half of the nineteenth century, they were becoming somewhat old-fashioned by the end of the Edwardian era.

¹⁰² On Leeds as an example of this, see Burt and Grady, *Kirkgate Market*, p.28.